

Extension Committee on Organization and Policy Leadership Advisory Council, May 21-23

Inquiry, exploration and valuing were elements of the appreciative inquiry process used in this year's ECOP Leadership Advisory Council to discern the strengths of Extension and its personnel and to help envision a vital future that builds on those strengths. Before the meeting, participants interviewed colleagues, using a predetermined set of questions designed to illuminate why respondents had initially sought extension as a profession and what elements now charged their passions and their work. It also helped identify those strengths which constituents were thought to value in Extension.

The session included training on how to use the appreciative inquiry process to discern strengths, envision outcomes and develop strategic plans to achieve those outcomes. Participants and presenters shared more than a dozen examples of how industries and state and land-grant universities had used appreciative inquiry as well as their own experiences interviewing their peers. Elbert C. Dickey chaired the Council and Alan E. Baquet and Keith F. Niemann, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, facilitated the appreciative inquiry process. Following is a synopsis of some of the major points brought forth from the process.

Why Extension? Understanding the People Factor

Motivation. By understanding what attracts faculty and staff to the Extension mission, Extension can help them build or strengthen meaningful connections to these interests. The top five factors respondents said led them to a career in Extension were: 1) The opportunity to help people and make a difference; 2) previous 4-H experience; 3) flexibility associated with the position; 4) a passion for the work; and 5) connection with a university and opportunity to apply research.

Personal Qualities. What personal attributes do Extension personnel see in themselves and what do others see in them that led to their success.

Qualities they see in themselves: creative, innovative, visionary, risk-taker; desire to help others; good listening skills; interest in application-oriented solutions; need for recognition; collaborator; facilitator; stubborn enough to work through barriers.

Qualities others see in them: dedication, passion, sincerity, caring, friendliness, a good listener; honesty; fairness; good sense of humor; fairness; optimism; enthusiasm; organized; risk-taker.

Qualities of Extension. *When you felt most successful at your work, what from Extension contributed to this?* The network and infrastructure of the system; opportunities to grow through independence and freedom in programming; opportunity to work with caring people to solve problems and make a difference; support and trust of the leadership; flexibility to shift role and programming to be responsive.

What is the core factor that gives life and vitality to Extension and without which the organization would cease to exist? Qualified and dedicated employees; the people who benefit from our programs; the county/state/land-grant relationship.

In Their Words

What do you value most about your work?

1) This is transformational work -- it makes a difference.

2) Watching people succeed

3) The people -- coworkers and clientele.

"I'm excited about how Extension has evolved, the issues it addresses and the ways it addresses those issues."

"I have an interest in people, a desire to do something creative, and to be one person that can make a difference."

"She (the client) trusted me to give her good information and to treat the situation in confidence. I strive to never violate that trust."

"We weren't just coming in ... to offer a temporary fix. We were working with local people to help create solutions and meet long-term needs."

Priority Issues in Extension's Future

Technology is changing how Extension advances its mission. Global is the new local and county and state borders can no longer define Extension's scope. Technology allows more integration of work locally as well as work with partners in other institutions. Improving the technological skill levels of personnel is integral to fully adapting technologies. To achieve these goals, Extension will need to assess the skill levels of Extension faculty and staff and reward personnel who develop skills and integrate technologies. Extension also will need to view information technology and communication specialists as peers and partners, including them from the onset of projects and listening to their recommendations. Extension programs will be available 24/7 through on-line resources.

Society is becoming more diverse, requiring Extension to be more diverse, flexible and responsive in its educational programs and delivery formats. To achieve this Extension will need to develop a flexible, dynamic and more diverse organization willing to change its teaching style, programming and educational materials to respond to the learning styles of the changing audiences. To better reach this more diverse group, Extension will need to become more diverse and more open. New teaching and program models will need to be developed based on research. Extension personnel who adapt and change, working in teams and with other groups should be recognized and rewarded for these efforts.

Extension, teaching and research efforts will be better integrated. To achieve this, Extension will need to garner administrative support and seek opportunities for working collaboratively on integrated projects of shared interest. Extension should initiate a system of joint appointments, use academic titles for Extension educators and recognize and reward such collaborative efforts through a merit-based reward system.

Partnering with other groups with similar interests will be expected and should be rewarded. This will allow for shared funds and resources and opportunities to reach new audiences.

System-wide tools should be developed to provide support for those contributing to the development and communication of the value of Extension – both for internal and external audiences. Extension personnel and program volunteers should fully understand what the land-grant mission is and the role of Extension in achieving that mission and be able to communicate this to Extension's clientele.

Scholarship of Extension should be enhanced through more extensive education, evaluation and communication efforts. Extension's mission should be communicated through college courses and new staff orientation. Metrics and tools should be developed to determine external stakeholder needs and allow program participants and Extension volunteers to convey what they value in Extension. The number of professional evaluation staff should be increased to provide more feedback for program development. Sociological and economic groups will need to define and articulate public value nationally and at the state system.

Communication with a variety of audiences will continue to be essential. Writing, communication, marketing and public relation skills should be enhanced at all levels.

Resources -- both personnel and financial -- will need to be made available to facilitate and reward these changes.

"Extension helps people achieve more than they thought possible."

"Our employees are out where they need to be -- taking the University to the people."

"We need to get over geographical boundaries."

"Our work is dedicated to creating opportunities."

"Without our research base, our purpose ceases to exist. It's what makes us stand out from what people read in the popular press."

Five years down the road, what do you see?

- More technology
- Healthier population
- Attitude of caring and sharing
- Diversity is valued

What in Extension makes you confident that the future you wish for can become reality?

- Committed employees
- Programs driven by stakeholders at the local level
- Excellent leadership -- bold and courageous.